

The Lost Tomb of Jesus – A Reasonable Response

On March 4, the Discovery Channel aired a documentary entitled “The Lost Tomb of Jesus.” Produced by James Cameron (of *Titanic* fame) and directed by documentary filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici, the program suggests that “the 2,000-year-old ‘Tomb of the Ten Ossuaries’ belonged to the family of Jesus of Nazareth.”¹ What keeps this from being an exciting possible confirmation of biblical claims is the discovery within this tomb of an ossuary² with the inscription “Jesus, son of Joseph.”

In other words, it is the bones of Jesus himself that have been discovered!

Or so the program would have us believe.

While the program itself - and the Discovery Channel’s supporting website - are careful to say that this find does not necessarily contradict the teachings of the Christian faith³, it seems clear that what “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” claims and what the Christian faith claims cannot both be true. If, indeed, the bones of Jesus are resting in a tomb alongside other members of his family, then the very foundation on which Christianity rests has collapsed.

In spite of what several archaeologists, theologians and other types of specialists have suggested already in the course of this discussion, Christianity is not merely a matter of faith which has neither need of nor use for historical verification. On the contrary, Christianity is a religion inextricably tied to historical truth. If Jesus did not actually rise from the dead and if he did not actually ascend into heaven as the Gospels and Acts report, then it is a useless faith. As one of the earliest and most influential followers of Jesus said, “...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless...” (1 Co. 15:17).

A claim to have found the bones of Jesus, then, is a claim that should rightly be of great concern to everyone who calls themselves Christian. Already, hundreds of websites and blogs have appeared, denouncing the find and, in many cases, attacking the individuals responsible for the documentary. This vehemence is understandable, but unfortunate. If these are indeed the bones of Jesus, then we Christians must face the bitter truth that our faith is worthless. I, for one, would find it very difficult to continue devoting my life to a system of belief whose very foundation had been shown false.

But are these the bones of Jesus?

I cannot, of course, claim complete objectivity in my analysis. I admit that I am initially skeptical for the simple reason that I don’t *want* these to be the bones of Jesus. I won’t deny this inherent bias, but having been forthright about this, I hope that what

¹ Quote taken from the Discovery Channel website:

<http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/about/about.html>

² An ossuary is a small stone box used to hold the bones of the dead. After someone’s body had decayed for approximately a year, what remained was sometimes gathered up and placed in these relatively small stone containers.

³ The program and the Discovery Channel’s website, for instance, suggest that the ascension of Jesus recorded in Acts 1 might have been a “spiritual” ascension, rather than a physical one, thus leaving behind a body that would need to be buried. They do not explain what exactly this might mean, but the suggestion is clearly at odds with the long-standing Christian belief that this departure involved Jesus’ actual resurrected body and not merely his spirit.

follows will be taken in the spirit that it is given: a genuine attempt to think rationally about the evidence which has so far been disclosed to us.

The argument that the bones found in this ossuary belong to the Jesus of the Gospels depends on a series of sequential premises. In essence, the sequence is this:

1. This tomb, first discovered in March of 1980 on Dov Gruner Street of the East Taipiyot neighborhood of Jerusalem, dates to the first century, the time of Jesus' life and ministry.
2. The tomb contained 10 ossuaries, 6 of which bear an inscription. All of the inscriptions involve names closely associated with the Jesus of the Gospels.
3. While all of the names were very common in the first century, statistical analysis indicates that it is highly unlikely that these names would be found all together in a tomb not associated with the Jesus of the Gospels. Estimates from 600:1 to 30,000:1 were given to show just how unlikely this possibility was thought to be. Therefore, statistics indicates that this tomb is the final resting place of Jesus of Nazareth and his family.

Of course, this is a bit of an oversimplification of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus", but I think it a fair summary of the evidence and reasoning as it was presented on the program.

On the surface, this looks like a solid argument. Looking a bit more closely, though, it becomes obvious that each of these premises has significant weaknesses.

To begin with, it is not entirely clear to me that this tomb or its ossuaries belong to the first century. From what I can gather, the dating seems to be primarily based on the fact that the tomb's ossuaries are similar to other ossuaries from the first century. That's fine. There is, of course, a certain degree of circularity to such an argument, but this does not seem to be a compelling reason to question the dating. On the other hand, there are other reasons why I remain undecided about the date. Chief among them is the fact that the six inscribed ossuaries are marked in three different languages: one appears to be proper Hebrew, four are in the related Aramaic language and one is in Greek. If this is, indeed, a family tomb, then the variance in language suggests to me that the ossuaries were placed within this tomb over a considerable period of time rather than within a few years or even decades of each other. The other possibility, of course, is that this is not a family tomb at all but contains the remains of several unrelated people. In either case, the variance of language significantly reduces the likelihood that this is Jesus and his immediate family.

It is also not clear to me why a first-century family such as Jesus' would have inscribed their ossuaries in anything other than Aramaic. The Hebrew inscription is perhaps understandable for a devout Jewish family, but the Greek notation is very puzzling for precisely the same reason.

Regarding the premise that the ossuary inscriptions are all names related to the biblical Jesus: this is simply not true. Unfortunately, the documentary obscures this fact with a various conjectures. The reality is that two of the six inscribed ossuaries have names which have no known connection to the family of Jesus. One reads "Matia" (i.e. "Matthew"). The other reads "Yehuda bar Yeshua (i.e., "Judah, son of Jesus"). Neither of these names is found in any biblical - or even extra-biblical - literature which speaks of

the family of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, coming as it does on the heels of the *Da Vinci Code* controversy, the general public is likely to suspect that the Judah ossuary is evidence of a child that Jesus had with his secret wife, Mary. Certainly “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” wants viewers to make this connection, but the fact remains that there is not one single mention of such a child in any ancient document. The idea of such a child is a modern invention of conspiracy theorists. As for the Matthew ossuary, the documentary suggests that this may have been a family member on Mary’s side. The basis of this suggestion appears to be the fact that the genealogy of Jesus, possibly traced through his mother Mary in the Gospel of Matthew, contains some similar names from several generations earlier. This is irrelevant. For this to be meaningful, we would need some evidence of a family member named Matthew within a single generation, which we do not have. The only Matthew associated with Jesus in the first century was the author of the Gospel bearing his name, a converted tax-collector with no familial connection to Jesus. Now, some might suggest that this author was buried in the tomb with the Jesus that he helped make famous, but such a proposal undermines the entire premise that this is a family tomb. And if it’s not a genuine family tomb, then why are we even talking about it?

At this point it should be obvious why the third premise of “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” bears little weight. First, the tomb does not contain only names associated with the Jesus of the Gospels. In fact, at least 1/3 of the names have no known historical association with Jesus⁴. Second, there is reason to believe that this is either a burial ground for people spread out over a considerable period of time (or simply not a family tomb at all). Third, these are all very common names in the first century. In fact, the names Jesus, Joseph, Judah, Matthew and Mary are all among the top 10 most common names from that era, a bit like John, Chris and Linda today. Very few people would take an inscription like “Chris, son of John” to be definitive evidence of having located the grave of a particular individual from our era. The same holds true for these names in the first century.

The documentary acknowledges this fact, but also argues that the presence of an ossuary with the inscription “Mariamene” (which is probably a form of the name “Mary”) changes the statistical landscape considerably. This, the documentary argues (or at least strongly implies) is the now-famous Mary Magdalene, which recent popular fiction writers have tried to make into the wife of Jesus and the mother of his child. Again, it must be stressed that there is no evidence of such a marriage, either within the biblical Gospels or in any other piece of ancient literature. However, the documentary conveniently overlooks this fact by invoking the awesome power of DNA analysis. Apparently a test of the bone debris from the Jesus box and the Mariamene box indicates that these two were not related by biology. “Why would this genetically unrelated woman be in this family tomb, then?” the program asks. The answer quickly supplied, of course, is that she must be the wife of one of the men buried here!

This is quite possible, although the fact that a Mary who may have been married to one of the men buried here is hardly a faith-shaking discovery since Mary was the single-most common name for Jewish women of that era (What!? You found a man

⁴ And, as we’ll see in a moment, it is quite possible that one of the inscribed ossuaries actually contains the remains of two individuals, at least one of whom would have no known familial connection to Jesus. This would mean that more than 42% of the occupants of this tomb have no known familial connection to Jesus of Nazareth.

named John married to a woman named Linda? What are the chances of that?!). But beyond this, there are other important issues which the documentary fails to address. First, there is no real evidence to suggest that Mariamene and Mary Magdalene are the same person. To the best of my knowledge, Mary Magdalene was called “Maria” throughout the first and second centuries, never “Mariamene.” There is a later Gnostic text called the Gospel of Phillip (probably written in the 4th century) which speaks of a Mariamene, but it identifies her as the sister of Philip the Apostle, not as Mary Magdalene and certainly not as the wife of Jesus. Second, the inscription on this ossuary does not simply say “Mariamene” but “Mariamene e Mara.” The stroke between these two names (presented here as an “e”) may be an abbreviation for the Greek word for “and”, suggesting that this box contains the bones of two women: Mariamene and Mara, neither of whom have any historical connection to the family of Jesus. Ben Witherington and Richard Bauckham, both experts in this field, concur on this point.

There are other major difficulties with the argument the documentary put forth. Chief among them, to my mind, is that fact that this tomb bears a prominent rosette carved into the stone over the entrance. This indicates that this was anything but a “secret” burial place and suggests, further, that it may even have been the burial place of a prominent and reasonably well-to-do Jerusalem family. None of this fits the historical circumstances of Jesus’ family: they were not from Jerusalem and they were relatively poor. Why such a family from Galilee would be buried in such a tomb in Jerusalem is difficult to conjecture. More importantly, how in the world could the founder and family of a movement despised and persecuted by the Jewish leadership of its day have had the freedom to bury their dead in such prominence?

Another major difficulty involves the ossuaries that are *not* present in the tomb: if this is the family tomb of the biblical Jesus, where are the ossuaries of his other family members? Where is Jude? Where is James? The documentary spends a great deal of time trying to establish that the now-famous James ossuary actually came from this tomb, but most of the experts involved in that earlier find disagree. Apart from the physical evidence, the burial place of James the brother of Jesus is well-attested to in ancient writings and this tomb is not in that area of Jerusalem. For more on this related subject, see *The Brother of Jesus* by Shanks and Witherington⁵. In any event, the fact remains that if this were the tomb of the biblical Jesus, there are several ossuaries that we would naturally expect to find and yet they are conspicuously absent. On a related note, there are four ossuaries from this site that are un-inscribed. If these were family members of a famous man such as Jesus of Nazareth, why would their relation to him not be memorialized?

And, of course, we have yet to mention the greatest difficulty with this theory: all the ancient evidence points to the fact that Jesus’ tomb was empty three days after his burial. Even the Jews and the Romans acknowledged this fact, alleging that the disciples had stolen the body. Let’s suppose for a moment this was true, that the disciples did sneak into the tomb and make off with the body of their dead master, somehow smuggling the body past the Roman guards who had been posted to thwart just such an attempt. Would they then bury him in an obvious tomb, mark it with a prominent rosetta

⁵ Witherington continues to believe that the James ossuary is a legitimate find, in spite of the fact that the owner of the relic is currently on trial in Israel for forgery. Though the media attention to this item has died down, the scholarly debate remains intense.

and then label his personal ossuary? If you're trying to hide a body, this is not the way to go about it!

This tomb, which the original Jewish archaeological team simply labeled "Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries" and wrote off as a typical, but unremarkable place of burial, is almost certainly *not* the final resting place of the Jesus of the Gospels. A few interesting, though hardly unlikely (given the commonness of the names) coincidences are all that give the theory a leg to stand on. What really makes the theory seem plausible to viewers of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" is not evidence, good scholarship or sound logical reasoning but rather clever film-making which involves substituting flashy visuals (robotic cameras! dramatic reenactments!) and buzzwords (DNA testing! patinas!) for hard facts.

The reality is that the Christian faith would never have gotten started, let alone flourished, especially amidst intense persecution in the first century, if the body of Jesus was known to have been laying in an easily-accessible Jerusalem tomb.

Still, this find may provide Christians with a welcome opportunity to discuss the resurrection of Jesus in the public forum. Many non-Christians will see the show or at least hear about its claims. If we followers of Jesus are prepared to respond with intelligent, reasoned arguments and explanations, we may find that what looks like a shot at the foundations of Christianity actually becomes an opportunity for evangelism.

For more information about this archaeological find, and a strong, reasonable Christian response, I recommend the excellent work of Dr. Ben Witherington (<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>) and Dr. Darrell Bock (<http://www.bible.org>).